

Redesigning Pocahontas

It is a story that is fundamentally about racism and intolerance and we hope that people will gain a greater understanding of themselves and of the world around them. It's also about having respect for each other's cultures. —Thomas Schumacher, senior vice president of Disney Feature Animation (*Pocahontas* 35)

The challenge was how to do a movie with such themes and make it interesting, romantic, fun. —Peter Schneider, president of Disney Feature Animation (*Pocahontas* 37)

Thomas Schumacher and Peter Schneider are two of the key executives who have re-established the Walt Disney Company as the premier animation studio in Hollywood. Schneider, in particular, became president of Disney Feature Animation in 1985, and since that time has assembled a coterie of first-rate talent and guided the division to a level of unprecedented success, boasting a lineup of recent pro-



When redesigning the image of Pocahontas, the supervising animator drew on four successive women for inspiration.

Disney, the "White Man's Indian,"

ductions that now includes *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Pocahontas* (1995). Disney is the film industry's exemplar for creating blockbuster motion pictures, fueling the releases with highly sophisticated advertising and marketing campaigns, and then maximizing profit by licensing literally hundreds of ancillary

products. For example, the film *The Lion King* and its merchandise have already grossed an estimated \$2 billion worldwide (Biskind 81). With each subsequent feature, Disney executives try to equal or top their last success.

Disney executives and animators had a related, though secondary, goal with *Pocahontas*, however. They wanted to address the rise in public criti-

cism from various ethnic groups over racial stereotyping in their most recent productions. Arab American groups, for instance, protested against certain imagery and lyrics in *Aladdin* (Kim 24; Sharkey 22). African American critics similarly pointed out that the three hooligan hyenas in *The Lion King* were thinly disguised black and Hispanic characters who seemed to be living in a

jungle equivalent of an inner-city ghetto (Sharkey 22). Disney executives understood from the outset that *Pocahontas* could be similarly problematic for the studio and planned to be more careful and sensitive in designing the film's portrayal of Native Americans.

The genesis of *Pocahontas* actually came from the eventual co-director, Mike Gabriel, who was trying to initiate a new project after finishing *The Rescuers Down Under* in 1990. He wanted to do a western, "a big scale epic that would lend itself to the kind of Broadway-oriented animated musicals that Disney had recently reinvigorated" (*Pocahontas* 36). Peter Schneider, for his part, had been considering an animated version of *Romeo and Juliet* for several years. The two seemingly disparate ideas merged for Gabriel when "somehow the name Pocahontas came into my mind . . . everyone knew the tale about her saving John Smith's life and it seemed like a natural for telling a story about two separate clashing worlds trying to understand each other" (*Pocahontas* 36). The Pocahontas narrative also furnished source material that could easily conform to the coming-of-age and romantic dictates of the Disney formula, as well as provide a spunky heroine as protagonist in the mold of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, and Jasmine in *Aladdin*.

Within this conventional framework, then, the talent at Disney Fea-

production team. Native American performers, moreover, were cast to provide the voices and characterizations for the main American Indian roles, including former American Indian Movement activist-turned-actor Russell Means, who would play Chief Powhatan, Pocahontas's father. The Walt Disney Company was apparently making all the appropriate and necessary preparations for an elaborate update of the Native American on film.

The "Hollywood Indian"

The "Hollywood Indian" is a well-established image that has appeared on movie screens around the world for nearly a century. The parameters of the stereotype are already outlined in a handful of useful studies (Bataille and Silet; Friar and Friar; Marsden and Nachbar; O'Connor). These analyses focus on representative types and traits, furnishing us with a composite that is deeply conflicted and contradictory, as is in the case of most racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes. In the essay "The Indians in the Movies" in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Michael T. Marsden and Jack Nachbar described the cultural context of captivity narratives, dime novels, stage melodramas, and Wild West shows, all of which contributed to the film industry's rendition of the Native American. They also offer a three-part model of American Indian characterizations on

line, as well as the general portrayal of American Indians. As the epigraphs suggest, the company's executives stressed a seriousness of purpose not usually connected with one of their animated pictures. For Roy Disney, Walt Disney's nephew and the board member who supervises the Feature Animation Division, "*Pocahontas* is a story that appealed to us because it was basically a story about people getting along together . . . which is particularly applicable to lots of places in the world today" (*Pocahontas* 33). Schneider confirmed, "It is an important message to a generation to stop fighting, stop killing each other because of the color of your skin" (*Pocahontas* 37).

Disney publicists asserted that "in every aspect of the storytelling, the filmmakers tried to treat Pocahontas with the respect she deserved and present a balanced and informed view of the Native American culture" (*Pocahontas* 34). Producer James Pentecost added, "We also tried to tap into [Pocahontas's] spirituality and the spirituality of the Native Americans, especially in the way they relate to nature" (*Pocahontas* 33). Finally, Russell Means conferred a much-welcomed imprimatur:

When I first read the script, I was impressed with the beginning of the film. In fact, I was overwhelmed by it. It tells the truth about the motives for Europeans initially coming to the so-called New World. I find it astounding that Ameri-

and the Marketing of Dreams

ture Animation began shaping its portrayals. Writers Carl Binder, Susanah Grant, and Philip LaZebnik drafted a script, while 12 interrelated teams of animators started experimental sketches of the characters and setting. Supervising animator Glen Keane journeyed to Tidewater, Virginia, hiring a number of local Native American consultants to advise his

film, in which men compose the first two stereotypes, as either "noble anachronisms" or "savage reactionaries," and women are presented as "Indian princesses" in the third, if they are presented on-screen at all.¹

In this respect, Disney's *Pocahontas* (dir. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg) promised to be an intriguing departure from the usual, male-centered story-

cans and the Disney Studios are willing to tell the truth. (*Pocahontas* 34)

Given the intentions voiced by the makers of *Pocahontas*, we intend in this article to examine the representation of Native Americans in the film, analyzing selected images, words, and sounds for their ideological content, particularly as they reflect points of view on race, gender, and social posi-

tion. We assume that this newest version of the Pocahontas story resides in the fusion of movie and merchandise, generating a kind of cultural supertext that clearly has been a huge financial success for the Walt Disney Company on a global scale. We will next survey critical and corporate responses to the film, reflecting on those reactions as telling indicators of mainstream and alternative viewpoints toward Native Americans today, and we will conclude with suggestions on how to use *Pocahontas* as a teaching tool in our homes and classrooms.

The Disney Version

You have to approach it carefully. The Disney version becomes the definitive version. —Glen Keane (qtd. in Gleiberman 42)

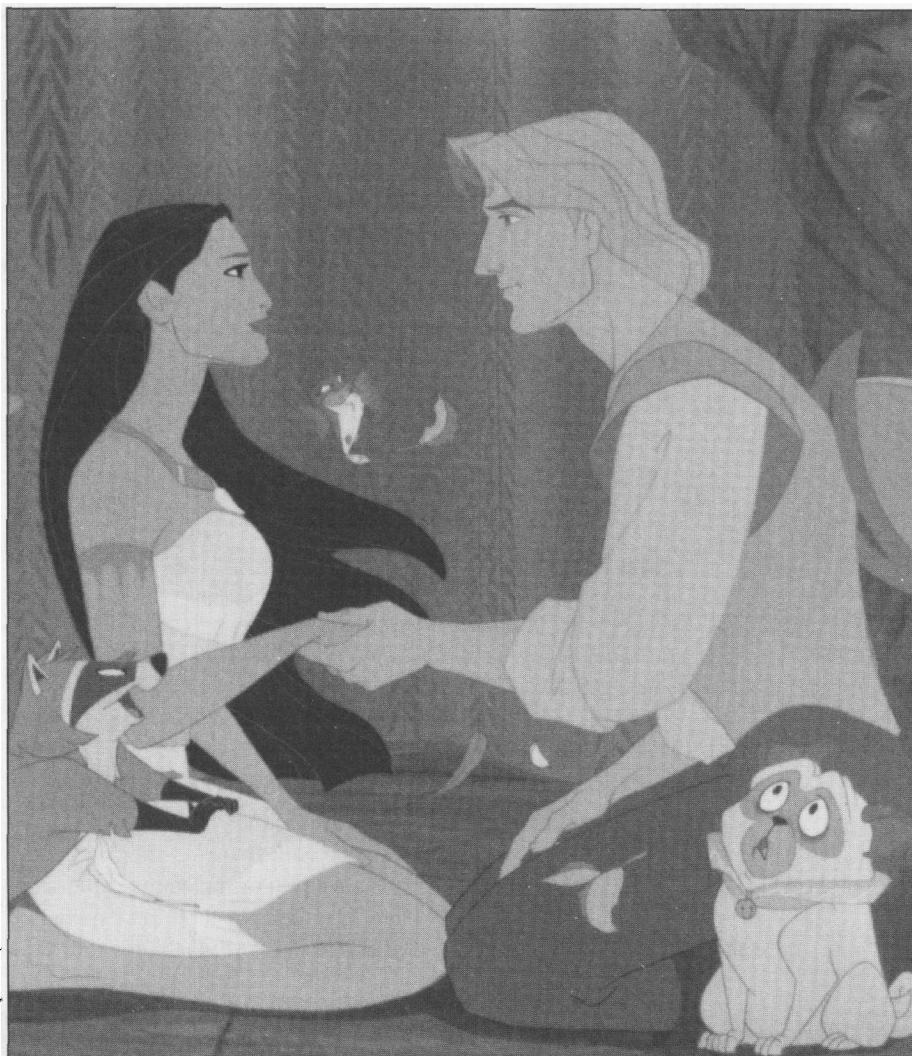
Three things are inevitable in 1995: death, taxes, and Disney's *Pocahontas*. —Pat H. Broeske (8)

When Disney began marketing *Pocahontas* nearly five months before the film's eventual release, conventional wisdom in Hollywood alleged that the film could never approach the money-making performance of *The Lion King*. Insiders carped about the historical nature of the subject matter, and, more disturbingly, the so-called "girl factor." "Boys won't want to go to a girl picture" (Shapiro and Chang 57). What the rumor mill in the film industry underscored, of course, is how out-of-proportion Hollywood expectations are in the 1990s. To date, *Pocahontas*'s box-office and merchandising proceeds are still described as modest when compared to those of *The Lion King*, which with *E.T.* (1982) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) is one of the three most-profitable films of all time. On the other hand, *Pocahontas* has already generated over \$1 billion in revenues on an \$80 million investment (a \$55 million production budget and \$25 million for advertising and marketing), and its total earnings just keep on mounting (Walt Disney Company Annual Report, 1995: 13, 31, 50).

Disney's campaign to sell *Pocahontas* began on 3 February 1995 with a 24-city mall display, complete with an animation kiosk where shop-

pers could electronically paint a cel from the film and view a 26-foot model of John Smith's ship. The promotional juggernaut continued that spring with dozens of tie-ins; for example, Burger King distributed 55 million toy replicas of the film's char-

acters. Disney's marketing of *Pocahontas* peaked with a highly publicized 10 June premiere in New York's Central Park on four, eight-story-high screens, before 110,000 spectators. This extravaganza was not only covered amply by the print and electronic news media, but



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acters with kids' meals, Payless Shoes featured a line of moccasins, and Mattel peddled a Barbie-like Pocahontas doll (Broeske 8). No doubt the most effective technique was attaching a *Pocahontas* trailer to the March release of *The Lion King* on home video, one which retailed 20 million units in just six days and ended by shattering all existing records, with more than 50 million tapes sold by year's end (Walt Disney Company Annual Report, 1995: 19).

it was also telecast live as programming on the newly launched United Paramount Network. *Pocahontas* eventually earned \$91 million in its first four weeks of domestic release and became a certifiable blockbuster by reaping more than \$300 million at film theaters worldwide during the remainder of 1995 (Kilday and Thompson 28–29).

All told, *Pocahontas* entered the American mainstream during the spring and summer of 1995 to share space with O. J. Simpson, *Batman*

Forever, Hootie and the Blowfish, and a handful of other high-profile popular cultural phenomena. Fashioned within the no-holds-barred commercial milieu of the Walt Disney Company, this animated feature erupted into the public sphere as the focal point of a massively successful advertising and marketing offensive. The film's storyline and characters were soon adapted into other media and provided the basis for an assortment of other widely retailed products, generating additional sales and promotions. Pocahontas, the 400-year-old legend, was expertly redesigned to Disney's usual specifications—meaning a full-length animated feature with a host of commodity tie-ins—thus becoming the version of the Pocahontas story that most people recognize today.

Don't Know Much About History

Moviemakers shouldn't be handcuffed when using real stories as jumping-off places for works of entertainment. —James Pentecost (Kim 24)

We never wanted to do a docu-drama, but something that was inspired by legend. —Peter Schneider (*Pocahontas* 37)

Representatives of the Walt Disney Company inadvertently alienated their chief Native American consultant, Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan, by sending her mixed signals about the kind of guidance they were seeking from her. Co-director Eric Goldberg, for example, remembers how "we met with surviving members of the Algonquin nation in Virginia and realized that it would be fascinating to show their culture in our film. We wanted to be as faithful as possible" (*Pocahontas* 34). In response, Custalow McGowan recalls

I was honored to be asked by them . . . but I wasn't at the studio two hours before I began to make clear my objections to what they were doing . . . they had said that the film would be historically accurate. I soon found that it wasn't to be. . . . I wish my name wasn't on it. I wish Pocahontas' name wasn't on it. (Vincent, Disney E5)

The filmmakers at Disney never really intended *Pocahontas* to be historical-

ly accurate, despite all the sentimental rhetoric; they were producing yet another animated feature after all. Native American advisors were hired to secure a more positive, even hagiographic, portrayal of Native American characters within an earnestly sympathetic narrative. Studio executives were, therefore, banking on the likelihood that a post-modern restyling of Pocahontas and her legend would also be an immensely popular and profitable version for audiences in the mid-1990s. They were, moreover, attempting to favorably affect public opinion regarding "Disney's America," a historical theme park planned for Northern Virginia, which was subsequently abandoned.

Artists and authors have actually been reshaping Pocahontas and her history for nearly four centuries. In *Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend*, William M. S. Rasmussen and Robert S. Tilton surveyed literally dozens of depictions, beginning during Pocahontas's lifetime, when she was "living proof that American natives could be Christianized and civilized" (7). Fact and fiction were blended at the outset into this legendary personality who symbolized friendly and advantageous relations between American Indians and English settlers from a distinctly Anglo-American point of view. Dis-

ney's animators are merely part of that longer tradition, the latest in a series of storytellers, painters, poets, sculptors, and commercial artists who have taken liberties with Pocahontas's historical record for their own purposes (Rasmussen and Tilton).

Disney's *Pocahontas* is, once again, a parable of assimilation, although this time the filmmakers hinted at a change in outlook. Producer James Pentecost for instance reported that

"Colors of the Wind" perhaps best sums up the entire spirit and essence of the film . . . this song was written before anything else. It set the tone of the movie and defined the character of Pocahontas. Once Alan [Menken] and Stephen [Schwartz] wrote that song, we knew what the film was about. (*Pocahontas* 51–52)

Schwartz agreed with Pentecost, adding that his lyrics were inspired by Chief Seattle's famous speech to the United States Congress that challenged white ascendancy in America and the appropriation of American Indian lands (*Pocahontas* 52).

"Colors of the Wind" functions as a rousing anthem for *Pocahontas*, extolling the virtues of tolerance, cross-cultural sensitivity, and respect for others and the natural environment:

You think you own whatever land you
land on
The earth is just a dead thing you can
claim
But I know ev'ry rock and tree and
creature
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name
You think the only people who are people
Are the people who think and look like
you
But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger
You'll learn things you never knew
You never knew.

These lofty sentiments, however, are down-played by the film's overriding commitment to romantic fantasy. Pocahontas, for example, sings "Colors of the Wind" in response to John Smith's remark that her people are "savages," but the rest of the technically stirring sequence plays more like an adolescent seduction than a lesson teaching Smith those "things [he] never knew [he] never knew."

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Pocahontas's search for her "dream," a classic Disney plot device, is a case in point. A great deal of dramatic energy is spent on Pocahontas's finding her "true path." She is sprightly, though troubled, in her conversations with Grandmother Willow. She is struggling with her own youthful uncertainties as well as her father's very definite plans for her:

Should I choose the smoothest course
Steady as a beating drum
Should I marry Kocoum
Is all my dreaming at an end?
Or do you still wait for me, dreamgiver
Just around the river bend?

Unsure of Kocoum, but regarding love and marriage as her only options, Pocahontas finally finds her answer in John Smith.

What this development discloses, of course, is the conventional viewpoint of the filmmakers: Pocahontas essentially falls in love with the first white man she sees. The film's scriptwriters chose certain episodes from her life, invented others, and in the process shaped a narrative that highlights some events, ideas, and values, while suppressing others. The historical Pocahontas and John Smith were never lovers; she was 12 and he was 27 when they met in 1607. In relying so completely on their romantic coupling, however, Disney's animators minimize the many challenging issues that they raise—racism, colonialism, environmentalism, and spiritual alienation.

The entire plot structure is similarly calculated to support the Disney game plan. The film begins in London in 1607 with John Smith and the Virginia Company crew setting out for the New World, and it concludes with Smith's return trip to England in 1609, although the duration of the movie seems to span weeks rather than years. The scriptwriters, nevertheless, terminate the narrative at the most expedient juncture, avoiding the more tragic business of Pocahontas's kidnapping by the English; her isolation from her people for a year; her ensuing conversion to Christianity; her marriage and name change to Lady Rebecca Rolfe; and her untimely death from tubercu-

losis at age 21 in England (Barbour; Fritz; Mossiker; Woodward). Disney's filmmakers did, in fact, research those details of Pocahontas's life before starting production, but obviously their aim was to keep audiences as comfortable as possible by providing a predictable product.

Co-director Eric Goldberg later claimed that "it's important for us as filmmakers to be able to say not everything was entirely hunky-dory by the end . . . which it usually is in a traditionally Disneyesque movie" (Mallory 24). Given the eventual fate of Pocahontas and the Algonquins, though, Disney's animators could hardly have opted for the usual "happily ever after" finale. The filmmakers, after all, were genuinely trying to offend no one, including the Native American community and their consultants.

Pocahontas's climactic sequence further establishes the film's dominant, love-story narrative, albeit with some variations of the classic Disney formula. After English settler Thomas shoots and kills Kocoum, tensions between the American Indians and the British mount. John Smith is captured by Kocoum's companions, blamed for his death, and immediately slated for execution. In a replay of the legendary rescue scene, Pocahon-

tas risks her life to save John Smith, catalyzing peace between the English and the American Indians. In the process, the film's animators and scriptwriters complete their upgrade of the Indian princess characterization by making Pocahontas more assertive, determined to realize her "dream," and according to her father, "wis[e] beyond her years."

The film, moreover, concludes with Pocahontas standing alone on a rocky summit, watching the ship carrying a wounded John Smith sail for England. She has presumably resolved to stay behind in Virginia and take her rightful place alongside her father as a peacemaker, even though her actions in the previous 80 minutes of the film suggest that her "path" lies elsewhere. *Pocahontas* thus reinforces another resilient stereotype that the main purpose of a Disney heroine is to further the interests of love, notwithstanding the bittersweet coda. Pocahontas's newfound ambition to become a mediator, then, is a workable if somewhat disingenuous solution, especially considering the latent historical realities percolating beneath this romantic plotline.

The questions then arise: Can a Disney animated feature be substantive as well as entertaining? Can race, gender, and the rest of *Pocahontas's* postmodernist agenda be presented in a thought-provoking way that still works for the animation audience, especially children? We believe the answer is yes, but we also believe the studio has an obligation to create a more forward-looking alternative to existing stereotypes and to deal more fully and maturely with the serious issues and charged imagery that it addresses.

Consider the redesigning of the character of Pocahontas. Supervising animator Glen Keane remembered how former studio chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg charged him with reshaping Pocahontas as "the finest creature the human race has to offer" (Kim 24). He also admitted, "I don't want to say a rut, but we've been doing mainly Caucasian faces" (Cochran 24). Keane, in turn, drew on four successive

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women for inspiration, beginning with paintings of Pocahontas herself; then Native American consultant Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan; then 21-year-old Filipino model Dyna Taylor; and finally white supermodel

only provide a kind of Native American styling to an old stereotype.

The British colonists also replace the Indians as stock villains in *Pocahontas*, with Governor Ratcliffe, in particular, singing about gold, riches,

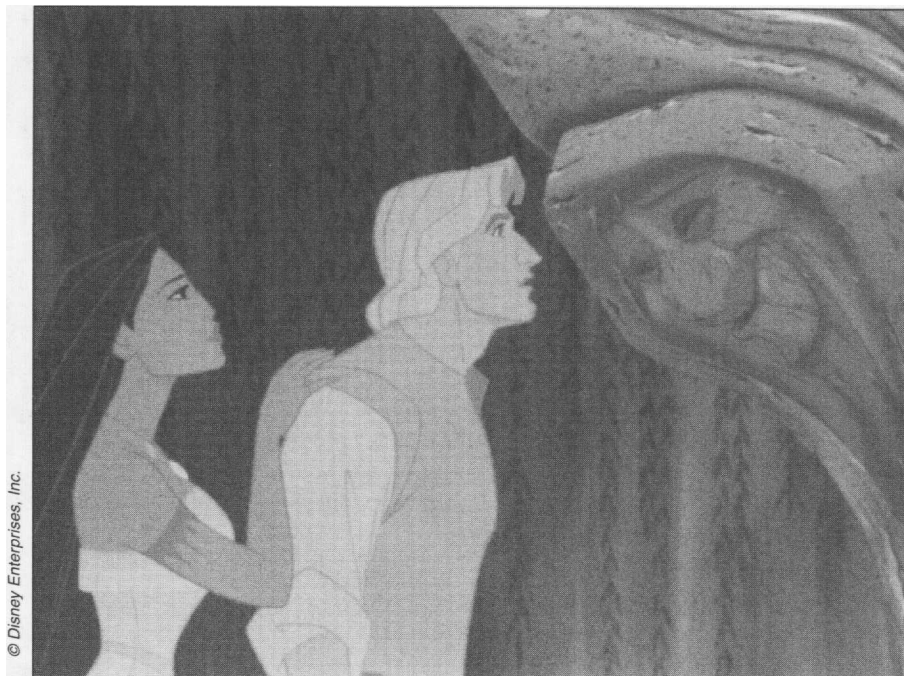
Contested Meanings

The meaning of a text is always the site of a struggle. —Lawrence Grossberg (86)

History is always interpreted. I'm not saying this film is accurate, but it is a start. I grew up being called Pocahontas as a derogatory term. They hissed that name at me, as if it was something dirty. Now, with this film, Pocahontas can reach a larger culture as a heroine. No, it doesn't make up for 500 years of genocide, but it is a reminder that we will have to start telling our own stories. —Irene Bedard (qtd. in Vincent E5)

The comments of Irene Bedard, the Native American actress who plays the voice of Pocahontas, augment many of the critical responses that surfaced after the release of *Pocahontas* in the summer of 1995. She offers audiences some valuable insights into the Native American perspective, especially with her painful recollection of being ridiculed with the surprising taunt, "Pocahontas." As she says, this film signals a welcomed counterbalance to such insults; most significantly, she calls for the emergence and development of a truly American Indian cinema that is the next needed step for fundamentally improving depictions of Native Americans on film.

Until that time, however, we can extend our understanding of *Pocahontas*, in particular, and established and alternative views toward Indian people in general, by examining the spectrum of critical reactions that the animated film engendered. The most striking aspect of *Pocahontas*'s critical reception is the contradictory nature of the responses: the film is alternately described as progressive or escapist, enlightened or racist, feminist or retrograde—depending on the critic. Inherently fraught with contradictions, Disney's *Pocahontas* sends an abundance of mixed messages, which probably underscores the limits of reconstructing the Native American image at Disney or, perhaps, any other major Hollywood studio that operates first and foremost as a marketer of conventional dreams and a seller of related consumer products.



Pocahontas introduces Captain John Smith to Grandmother Willow, the only fantastical element in the film.

Christy Turlington (Cochran 24). After studio animators spent months sketching her, their Pocahontas emerged as a multicultural pastiche. They started with Native American faces but eventually gravitated to the more familiar and Anglicized looks of the statuesque Turlington. Not surprisingly, all the key decision makers and supervising artists on *Pocahontas* were white males. Disney and Keane's "finest creature" clearly is the result of a very conventional viewpoint.

Accordingly, what of avoiding old stereotypes? Native American actors were cast in all the native roles in the film; still, Pocahontas's screen image is less American Indian than fashionably exotic. Many critics, for example *Newsweek*'s Laura Shapiro, refer to the makeover as "Native American Barbie" (Shapiro and Chang 77)—in other words, Indian features, such as Pocahontas's eyes, skin color, and wardrobe,

and power in the appropriately titled song "Mine, Mine, Mine." The film's final impression, therefore, is that, with Ratcliffe bound, gagged, and headed back to England, American Indians and Europeans are now free to coexist peacefully. Race is a dramatic or stylistic device, but the more profound consequences of institutional racism are never allowed even momentarily to invade the audience's comfort zone.

Perhaps the Disney studio should trust its patrons more. Fairy tales and fantasies have traditionally challenged children (and adults) with the unpleasant realities lurking just beneath their placid exteriors. Audiences are likely to enjoy added depth and suggestiveness enough to buy plenty of tickets and merchandise. Disney's *Pocahontas* raises important issues but does not fully address them; it succeeds as a king-sized commercial vehicle, but fails as a half-hearted revision.



The National Portrait Gallery houses the only known life portrait of Pocahontas, which is actually her nickname meaning “playful one.”

As teachers, critics, parents, or students of popular culture, we can usefully extend the scope of our examinations of *Pocahontas* by studying the various critical communities that have engaged the Disney version with their own unique perspectives. These additional points of view help to illuminate not only what *Pocahontas* presented directly—such as mainstream representations of race and gender—but also what it underplayed or ignored—such as peripheral outlooks on those issues or the historical reality underlying the legend.

The Native Americans who worked on the film—such as Russell Means, the voice of Powhatan, and Irene Bedard—generally commended it. Means specifically called it “the single finest work ever done on American Indians by Hollywood” (*Pocahontas* 34). His comments especially drew fire from the Native American press, where a number of both columnists and readers who sent letters to the editor wondered if the former head of the American Indian Movement had “sold out to the white man and his money” (Rattler D1). Means’s pronouncements evidently became a source of controversy in a debate that highlights

the competing conceptions of American “Indian-ness” that co-exist in contemporary America.

A valuable place to start the discussion on *Pocahontas* is Robert Berkhofer Jr.’s seminal work *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. This insightful analysis underscores that the dominant view of Native Americans has always originated with Euro-American culture, reflecting Anglicized attitudes and preferences and ultimately pushing native perspectives to the margins of society, if not entirely out of view. Disney’s *Pocahontas* is thus another example of the “white man’s Indian,” mostly because the studio was only willing to partially incorporate its consultants’ advice. Berkhofer’s book can also be supplemented with Daniel Francis’s *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, which again emphasizes how most popular representations of Native Americans are the products of white needs, intentions, and purposes.

Pocahontas is, moreover, a text in which the issues of race and gender intersect. Bedard found herself at odds with several Native American women writers when she remarked, “When I was growing up, I wanted so much to be Barbie. Now, some little girl might want to be Pocahontas. That’s a step in the right direction” (Vincent E5). Martina Whelshula and Faith Spotted Eagle countered Bedard’s sentiment in their review of the film in the *Spokane Review-Perspective*, reprinted in *Indian Country Today*. They stated that Disney’s *Pocahontas* is “part of Barbie culture. A culture that relies on sexism, capitalism and lookism . . . where a woman is elevated only on her appearance . . . where a heroine lives only for approval from men” (D1).

This flashpoint again supplies a productive basis on which to encourage discussion on the social construction of beauty standards and race. From it can be gained a sense of the profound distress that is still elicited in the native community by the longstanding traditions of the “Hollywood Indian.” Even Disney’s relatively benign por-



After his return to England, Captain John Smith promoted the colonization of North America until his death (copy of engraving located at National Portrait Gallery).

trayal prompted consultant Shirley “Little Dove” Custalow McGowan to say her “heart sorrowed” upon first seeing the film (Silver 61). Two letters to the editor of *Indian Country Today* likewise expressed dismay and anger, especially about Disney’s use of the song “Savages,” which the authors found highly offensive (Letters D2). University of Texas anthropologist Pauline Turner Strong aptly explains the reasons behind such a reaction when she writes that

for many Native Americans “savage” is the “S” word, as potent and degrading as the word “nigger.” I cannot imagine the latter epithet repeated so often, and set to music in a G-rated film and its soundtrack. It is even more shocking to write it in a review. Is “savage” more acceptable because it is used reciprocally? But then does this not downplay the role the colonial ideology of savagism played in the extermination and dispossession of indigenous people? (Strong, H-Net)

The portrayal of the English in *Pocahontas* similarly triggered outrage in the British press. The 30 July 1995 *Times*, for instance, referred to Pocahontas as

history's most famous squaw. . . . The English are thugs, all greed, gold, and guns, and they treat natives like savages. The Indians, by contrast, are civilized, peace-loving and eco-conscious. The animators have significantly made the Redskins look pretty much like modern paleface Americans, and speak like them, too. . . . Disney's fable of an arcadian American history wrecked by incursions from the Old World is obviously a means of allaying a bad conscience, while voicing xenophobic resentments about corrupt Europeans. (Adair 9)

Evidently the shoe is now on the other foot, and this symbolic inversion can lead to a fruitful exchange about multiculturalism and the function of stock villainy in popular film. As Betsy Sharkey writes in the *New York Times*, "British males seem to be one of the few safe villains in these politically correct times" (22). Paying attention to such cues can produce striking illustrations of intercultural differences in perspective, allowing us all to "learn [some] things [we] never knew [we] never knew."

The majority of America's mainstream press coverage also concentrated on *Pocahontas*'s racial and gender depictions, along with instances in which the film differed from the historical record. On one hand, Caryn James of the *New York Times* called *Pocahontas* "a sharp revision of the classic Disney fairy tale formula . . . [and] a model of how smartly those elements can be reinvigorated." She, moreover, viewed *Pocahontas* as "the most subversive heroine in the Disney canon" (F1). In contrast, Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* provided a more scathing, albeit glib, description:

Pocahontas herself has been conceived as a strapping, high-cheek-boned update of the usual Disney Princess—she's an aerobicized Native American superbabe, with long, muscular brown legs, regal shoulder blades, and silky black hair flowing down to her waist. With her vacuous Asian doll eyes, she looks ready to host *Pocahontas' House of Style*. (42)

Mal Vincent of the *Virginian-Pilot* and *Ledger-Star* (of Norfolk) concurred with James that "'Pocahontas' is a signal that Disney animators are

willing to take new, and daring, risks" (Vincent, *Pocahontas* E2). David Sterritt of the *Christian Science Monitor* disagreed, saying that Disney is

clinging to formulas that refuse to grow in any but superficial ways. True enough, "*Pocahontas*" tips its hat to such trendy (and worthy) causes as conservation and environmentalism, and even delivers a hearty endorsement of interracial dating. Yet the studio can hardly be congratulated for "taking a stand" on socially relevant issues, since it's careful to wrap its ideas in an aura of nostalgic fantasy that neutralizes their ability to challenge or stimulate us. (13)

Whether "subversive" or sexist, "daring" or reactionary, *Pocahontas* is a deeply conflicted text.

Finally, *Pocahontas*'s widespread popularity has produced a corresponding upsurge in interest in the historical Pocahontas and in Native Americans. After the release of *Pocahontas* in June 1995, admissions to the Jamestown Settlement rose 60 percent over those of July 1994 (Holland), eventually reaching 38 percent more than the average for the previous five summers (Renewed 3). Although other factors contributed to Jamestown's increased

tourism, such as various marketing strategies and the 400th anniversary celebration of the birth of Pocahontas, the Disney film contributed greatly to the upturn.

In the words of one Jamestown historical interpreter, tourists are "coming here to learn. I've been pleasantly surprised at how much parental concern there is for children getting more than was shown in the movie" (Renewed 3). *Pocahontas* can be used as a springboard to encourage our students and children to look beyond the movie and the merchandise. Jean Fritz's young adult history, *The Double Life of Pocahontas*, is a wonderful place to start for adolescents. The informative books Philip Barbour's *Pocahontas and Her World*, William Rasmussen and Robert Tilton's *Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend*, and Robert Tilton's *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative* and the 1995 half-hour documentary *Pocahontas: Ambassador of the New World* (A Perpetual Motions Production for the A&E Television Network) are other rewarding alternatives to the ubiquitous Disney version.

NOTES

1. In the first category, a "noble anachronism" embodies Rousseau's notion of "natural man and his inherent goodness," who is ultimately doomed by the onslaught of Euro-American culture. Second, a "savage reactionary" confronts white manifest destiny with violent defiance but is also annihilated for the overall good of advancing civilization. Lastly, an "Indian princess" is rooted in the legend of Pocahontas. She is typically maidenly, demure, and deeply committed to some white man—for example, John Smith in the case of *Pocahontas*.

2. Keane was the animation supervisor for *Pocahontas*.

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